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AUTHOR Edington, Everett D.
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ABSTRACT

The regional approach as an alternative for meeting the needs of rural youth is discussed in comparison to the small school district which cannot possibly serve the broad spectrum of student needs in rural areas. The rural educational setting and its shortcomings are described as the lack of facilities, a lack of an obvious connection between education and the ability to earn a livelihood, the inability on the part of pupils or parents to see a relationship between the school curriculum and their community life, and the students' inadequate knowledge of job requirements for particular professions, which hinders them in preparing for a certain vocation. Both the regional approach and the "shared-service concept" are discussed. The advantages of these approaches are that (1) an intermediate unit allows cooperation between small districts, (2) the combination of rural schools' operations results in a more efficient and economical operation, (3) the incompetents can be weeded out of the profession through closer supervision and better evaluations, (4) the composite knowledge and cooperative utilization of resource personnel can be increased area wide, (5) through textbook exchange programs, the one book/one student concept can be abandoned, (6) by consolidation of duplicatory functions and data-processing equipment, the number of personnel required in a supportive role can actually be reduced. Several project reports (i.e., the Appalachian Regional Commission Annual Report of 1968, the 8-state Rocky mountain area project, the National Outlook Conference on Rural Youth, and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory report of 1969) are cited. (NQ)

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SERVING RURAL YOUTH: A REGIONAL APPROACH

BY

EVERETT D. EDINGTON, Ed. D.

Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education
and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS)
New Mexico State University

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SERVING RURAL YOUTH: A REGIONAL APPROACH

Since it is impossible for the small school district to serve the broad spectrum of student needs in rural areas, it is vital that educators look at the regional approach as an alternative for meeting the needs of rural youth. However, before examining this approach--which allows for provision of a variety of services over a larger area and number of districts--the rural educational setting must be outlined.

The Rural Educational Setting

The rural or small town school has certain advantages as well as inherent disadvantages. Usually, members of these institutions, such as teachers and administrators, are products of the prevailing culture of the community and thus are aware and tolerant of the values and peculiarities of the students; in addition, the small size of the rural school enables it to be more flexible in scheduling and varying school routine.

However, few rural schools take advantage of these positive factors, and disadvantages tend to dominate the picture. Part of the problem is the child's environment outside the school. Significant components of this environment are the low educational attainment level of the parents and the lack of early childhood (preschool) programs oriented toward giving students valid reasons for staying in school.

Rural students do tend to drop out more frequently than students in urban areas. The Appalachian Regional Commission Annual Report of 1968 indicated that the dropout rate for 18- and 19-year olds in central cities was 25.8 percent, in all urban areas 23.7 percent, and in rural areas 33.4 percent (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1967).

Furthermore, a project report dealing with the problems of rural students transferred to a more comprehensive high school in Minnesota suggests that the rural school may not be doing as good a job across the board as its

urban counterpart. The report cites the numbers of students from the two types of schools, rural and urban, who were placed in remedial sections and in enrichment sections. Percentagewise, fewer rural students than urban were placed in remedial English sections and 5 percent more rural than urban were placed in remedial mathematic classes, but the percentage of rural students assigned to enrichment classes was minimal (less than 1 percent in any of the three disciplines), while 17 percent of the urban students took enrichment mathematics and 20 percent were placed in enrichment science sections (Board of Education, St Cloud, Minnesota for Bureau of Secondary and Elementary Education, 1967).

A Study of Problems in Education of the Native People of Alaska listed the following as major shortcomings:

> Lack of facilities presents a major obstacle to the goal of universal education through the secondary school.
>
> There is a lack of an obvious connection between education and the ability to earn a livelihood. [At this particular point, I am reminded of an incident in a North Central Association Self-Evaluation, 7 of 9 high school mathematics teachers responded that they did not in any of their mathematics classes indicate how mathematics contributed to earning a living. Furthermore, the teachers did not refer to any career occupation wherein proficiency in advanced mathematics was required.]
>
> Little relationship is seen by pupils or parents between the school curriculum and their community life. Parents do not understand what the school purports to do.
>
> Inadequate knowledge of job requirements for particular professions causes students to form vague and distorted notions of how one prepares for a certain vocation (Lekanof, 1968).

These shortcomings pertain to many of the rural school systems in America, and the last two items must be of particular concern to administrators of rural school districts. Continuing patterns of out-migration that result from farm youth seeking their fortune in the cities and other urban areas highlight the need for truly comprehensive secondary schools in rural areas.

To reverse the out-migration trend, if this is a real desire, we must create incentives for persons to remain in the community rather than creating feelings of obligation to stay (West Virginia Council on Churches for Commission on Religion in Appalachia, 1970). On the other hand, if reversal of the outward trend is neither desirable nor feasible, we are remiss if our educational programs are not comprehensive enough to provide our students with a competitive background.

The Regional Approach

In simplest form, the requirements for developing a truly responsive and comprehensive rural educational program are money, people, and imaginative ideas. For example, in the post-World War II period, when financial support became subject to critical scrutiny by the taxpayers and legislators who had given unstintingly in World War II, the military resorted to the pooling concept--an arrangement whereby facilities, equipment, armaments, and personnel not required for everyday use were centralized at some higher echelon and were available to many units. This concept is now practiced in education; resources are provided by regional service organizations with the result that resource materials are now available that formerly would have been impossible to obtain because of financial restraints.

The regional or intermediate district is not a return to the old country school system. The regional district is a largely service-oriented system which allows small districts to cooperate and, as an intermediate unit dedicated to serving its subordinate, can never constitutea deterrent to the educational effort. The areas wherein cooperation can be effected include:

Instructional materials centers (included audiovisual materials)
Pupil personnel services
Area vocational programs
Textbook exchange programs
Centralized transportation systems

Consultative help with inservice programs and curriculum development
Driver education courses
Psychological and guidance services
Computer services
Cooperative purchasing

The intermediate unit may do more, depending on its responsibilities within the framework of state organization. For example, in Michigan the intermediate unit facilitates implementation of statewide objectives and ameliorates the state problem of administrative span (Emerson, 1967).

Let me give some examples of the advantages of the regional district concept. A feasibility study of a centralized transportation system in a rural intermediate school district concluded that combining the operations of the seven rural schools would result in a more efficient and economical operation. Cost efficiency in bus purchasing and bus maintenance can be realized; and administrative time in bus purchasing, routing, and scheduling can be saved. The overall advantages to the districts were cited as safety, economy, control, and availability (Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant COOR Intermediate School District for the Department of Education, 1967).

Other advantages of the regional approach are: (1) through closer supervision and better evaluations, the incompetents can be weeded out of the profession; (2) through textbook exchange programs, the one book/one student concept can be abandoned; (3) the composite knowledge and cooperative utilization of resource personnel can be increased areawide; and, (4) by consolidation of duplicatory functions and data-processing equipment, the number of personnel required in a supportive role can actually be reduced.

Perhaps more significantly, the consolidation of program planning can enable the cooperating districts to avail themselves of specialist personnel.

A Rocky Mountain area, eight-state project concerned with designing future educational programs recognized the advantages of a regional approach.

The project report contained several recommendations which may provide "food for thought" with respect to helping meet the needs of rural schools. Most could be met with regional centers. The more significant of these recommendations are that programs should:

1. Provide early childhood (preschool) programs
2. Place emphasis in primary grades on mastery of certain skills (use a flexible ungraded program)
3. Adjust high school districts so each will have sufficient size to justify a comprehensive curriculum
4. Encourage schools to include resource personnel in educational programs
5. Provide special education and remedial programs
6. Abandon the concept of one book/one student
7. Establish regional intermediate districts with authority and responsibility for
   a. Area vocational programs
   b. Special education
   c. Research and innovation
   d. Instructional materials centers
   e. Programs for dropouts
   f. Adult continuation programs
   g. Pupil personnel services

Not mentioned in the project report, but perhaps most significant with respect to changes from traditional rural education, are the enlightened leadership and greater transmission of operational philosophy and objectives to the community which result from better communications within the intermediate unit. In a speech presented in 1970 at the National Outlook Conference on Rural Youth, Elbie Gann pointed out that adoption of several new projects, including shared services, can, if there is community support, board of education support, and a highly trained and experienced faculty, help the isolated small school offer better programs.

While the administrative benefits of an intermediate unit are recognized, it should be noted that the greatest value of the intermediate unit appears to lie in the services and resources it can provide to the local districts (Legant, 1968, 1969).

It should also be noted that 32 of the 50 states utilize a three-level structure: the state education agency, the local school district, and an intermediate administrative unit. These regional units go by a variety of names; for example, in Wisconsin they are referred to as Cooperative Educational Service Agencies, in New York as Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, and in Washington as Intermediate District No.___Area Service Centers. Most are part of the state system, but all are developed because of the recognition that some highly specialized services require an operational base larger than local school districts (Haviland, 1965).

A major breakthrough in the broadening and more efficent use of educational resources in rural areas is the "shared-service concept," wherein those types of services that smaller districts are unable to afford are provided over a larger area. This concept requires that each small district assume only a portion of the costs.

Types of shared services vary widely and may include guidance services; special instructional programs; computer services; school health services; and services of consultants, coordinators, and supervisors. Growing very steadily in this area are programs that are transported from one school to another. For example, audiovisual services have been supplied to many small schools on a cooperative basis.

Another type of program that may be shared is the in-service training program for teachers, wherein an intermediate unit, county, service center, or other type of unit may provide in-service programs for teachers in the area. Many states--such as Texas, Nebraska, South Carolina, Michigan, and New York--have made these types of units legal by legislation. The units are organized

in different ways in the various states and may or may not have taxing power. In some areas, the policy-making boards are lay people, while in others the boards are composed of representatives of the school districts involved.

One very effective resource that these units have been able to provide is information. Many of the units serve as resource centers and have ERIC files, as well as other types of materials, available for use by students and teachers.

Another concept within the realm of shared services is that of sharing the students. Students may travel from one district to another in order to receive certain types of programs. This reciprocal sharing between small districts with different types of programs allows students to switch districts to attend those schools offering programs best meeting their individual needs.

The most extensive developmental program related to rural shared services was conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Jongeward and Heesacker, 1969). A kit (available through ERIC as ED 036 666) was developed containing three documents useful in planning shared service activities to improve rural education: Document 13-A identifies 215 shared services in fifty states and provides an index of each service by subject area and by state; 13-B is a series of ten information sheets on selected shared services containing interesting facts about the service and identifying sites of exemplary services; and 13-C lists related documents available through ERIC.

With respect to evaluation of how well these various regional intermediate units are doing, few hard data are available. The California Committee of Ten Report (Ed 018 282) indicates that the additional services these intermediate units are providing school districts are proving invaluable; the report suggests, therefore, that each unit have full authority for its own budget and possess fiscal independence (Carithers, 1967).

An evaluation of a New Mexico Educational Service Center (ESE) in FY 1966-67 reported 376 requests for specialized service and 948 staff

visits by ESC personnel to school systems to help in program development, special education, workshops, and testing. Mobile learning materials centers were most effective in poor districts having few schools and less effective in districts with several schools. In terms of client satisfaction, which may be the most significant criterion, the ESC rated high (Kelly and Homan, 1967).

Another evaluation report indicated that the outstanding features of a predominantly rural Pennsylvania intermediate unit were in the area of special education and in programs for the mentally retarded (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1968). Comments in this report regarding an apparent dearth of intermediate units in rural areas are particularly significant when it is recalled that a rather common assumption is that the greatest strength of the middle-echelon ESC lies in the rural parts of the nation.

Concluding Remarks

The report of a consultation on youth and poverty, held at West Virginia Wesleyan College in January 1970, stated:

> Compensatory education has been based on the assumption that what's wrong with the educational system is the students in it--that they must be motivated and all sent through the same process, which dehumanizes them in the process (West Virginia Council on Churches for Commission on Religion in Appalachia, 1970).

I seriously doubt that such an assumption is any less invalid when applied to all aspects of public school education. A comprehensive school program must meet the needs of all individuals; however, implementation of comprehensive programs in rural areas has been limited by a number of circumstances: geographic isolation, inadequate finances, cultural bias or the prestige structure of communities, heavy emphasis on college preparatory programs, and shortage of truly talented teachers and administrators. Thus, the regional

approach must be used to provide the means for overcoming the circumstances that usually limit comprehensive programs in rural areas.

Gann, in his speech at the 1967 National Outlook Conference on Rural Youth, stated that the disadvantaged rural child becomes the disadvantaged urban slum dweller. Many urban problems have their roots in rural settings, and, because of this, improvement projects for rural schools are important for all America (1967).

If this situation still exists, and I suspect that it does, it behooves us all to take any appropriate measure to serve rural youth through a comprehensive, forward-looking, educational program. It is impossible for each small school district to serve the broad spectrum of educational needs of its children. It would be much easier to meet the children's needs by coordinating the services over a larger area and number of districts. Although there is a real reluctance by many small districts to consolidate and lose their identity, regionalism may help them to maintain their identity and yet better serve the youth in rural areas.

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